

United Congregational Church
Southeast corner of Spring &
Pelham Sts.
Newport
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-326

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
37-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

UNITED CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
37-

Location: Southeast corner of Spring and Pelham Streets.

Present Owner: United Congregational Church.

Present Occupants: United Congregational Church.

Present Use: Religious.

Statement of
Significance:

This church, built in 1855-1857, serves the United First and Second Congregational parishes of Newport whose history began in the late 17th century. The building, designed by Joseph C. Wells and redecorated on the interior in 1880 by John LaFarge, is an interesting and well-preserved example of the Romanesque Revival, brownstone churches of the mid 19th century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners:

The building is located in Plat 27, Lot 11. The following is an incomplete chain of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the City of Newport. Reference is to number and volume of the Land Evidence Books, (LEB.--, p.--).

1833 Deed of October 23, 1833, recorded in LEB. 19, pp. 502-05.

From: George Gibbs, by executors
To: United Congregational Society of Newport
For: \$2000

"... a parcel... bounded Northerly by Pelham Street two hundred ninety feet, Easterly on the land of the heirs of John Banister one hundred feet, Southerly on the Stelle lot now owned by the heirs of Stephan Bowen two hundred ninety feet, and Westerly on Spring Street one hundred feet..."

2. Date of erection: 1855-1857. The cornerstone was laid December 5, 1855. The church was dedicated January 15, 1857.

3. Architect: Joseph C. Wells of New York
4. Builder or contractor: John Sniffen, Carpenter; Samuel McCorkle and Sons, Masons; William Crommelin, Stone Cutter
5. Original plans: None known
6. Alterations and additions: The original northwest corner tower, the top of which was lost in a hurricane, is shown in an old photograph and a colored lithograph (unsigned, undated, but probably ca. 1870's) on exhibit in the narthex. The tower originally terminated with a belfry with triple arcades at about the roof peak level. The top level still survives. This arcade level was topped by a concave, steep pyramidal roof surmounted by an open cupola with a weather vane. The tower was particularly effective because of the placement of the church. In 1880 the interior of the church was decorated by John LaFarge. The attached parish house was erected in 1908.
7. Important old views and descriptions:
 - a. Old views: Old photograph and colored lithograph, unsigned and undated, ca. 1870's, United Congregational Church.
 - b. Descriptions: Description of the interior decoration by John LaFarge, Newport Mercury, June 12, 1880.

"The improvements to the United Congregational Church, which have been in progress for the past four months are now nearing the end, and it is expected to occupy the church for worship on Sunday. The repairs to the roof, finished some time since, render the covering of the church complete and sound. The interior repairs have been under the direction of Mr. John LaFarge, the artist, and his work justifies the wisdom of securing his services. The decorations cover the walls and ceiling, and new windows are to be put in throughout except in the organ loft. A part of the new windows are already in place, and they are exceedingly handsome. Each couplet of windows is different from all the others, so that the church will contain twenty designs of windows. The patterns are very fine and thoroughly artistic. The designs are in flowers, worked in appropriate colors. The windows on the south side are less transparent than those on the opposite side, where there is less light than on the south side. By this device the light is perfectly modulated, and the

decorations are shown off to the best advantage. Utility and beauty are very happily united in the new windows.

The decorations have been put on with the most painstaking care by experienced workmen under the frequent personal supervision of Mr. LaFarge. The ceiling of the nave of the church is decorated in large panels of fifteen feet by thirty three feet, each panel occupying the space between the transverse beams. The design is of the Byzantine style, and has an air rich and decorative. Beginning with the outside, is a narrow line of blue against the molding. Then comes a scroll in flower pattern of green and yellow upon a background of red. Next is a row of pearls in yellow; then a leaf pattern in green and red on a dark ground; then fret-work of red on dark blue; then a second line of pearls in yellow; then a leaf pattern similar to the first one; then a small scroll of violets; then a row of pearls; then a scroll in flower pattern larger than the first. This brings the eye to the center panel, which is of dark green, with two circular leaf patterns at either end.

Above the panels, in the gallery of the nave, is a corresponding design, made up of a broad stencil in red, green, yellow and white, a line of green, a band of yellow, and the center of dark green. The brackets adjoining these panels are finished in green and gold, with a red vine pattern. On the arch is a gold ribbon pattern. On each of the two beams is a chain pattern in gold, with blue between, and above is a vine pattern of green and yellow. The ceiling over the galleries of the church is finished in alternate panels of gold leaf and a rich looking Turkish pattern of dark, handsomely blending colors. The walls are finished in a broad border of red, yellow, green, gold bands, with a broad band of a vase and flower pattern. Then succeeds the dark green background, and below this is a band in flower pattern of yellow and red upon a background of black. The galleries of the church are painted in dark green, and the pillars in the same color. The styles above described are continued around the entire church except at the pulpit, where the wall is decorated with a handsome and distinct pattern, representing the entrance to a temple. This is of rich colors, and handsome design, and fitly rounds out the decorations. On the sides are gold stars on a background of dark blue. The pilasters are in gold, supporting the pediment. Underneath is the arch of blue, gold and red, with light green below for groundwork. The design is Romanesque, and exceedingly fine. It is flanked on either side by diamond shaped figures, also Romanesque, and which has

red as the prominent color.

The church in its interior is now as handsome as any church of its class in New England."

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

At a meeting on May 7, 1833, the United Congregational Church was formed by the union of the First Congregational and Second Congregational churches. The first building on this site was dedicated in 1834. Operations on the new building were delayed for the lack of Connecticut sandstone. The stone was unable to be delivered due to the icing over of the Connecticut River.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Records of Deeds in the Newport City Hall.
United Congregational Church Records and Papers in Vault A of the Newport Historical Society.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Newport Mercury, December 8, 1855.

Newport Mercury, January 12, 1856.

Newport Mercury, May 1, 1880.

Congregationalism including a short history of the United Congregational Church of Newport, Rhode Island, (pamphlet available at the church).

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Office Records of Joseph C. Wells.

Prepared by Thomas M. Slade
University of Notre Dame
Project Historian
August, 1970

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: An interesting and well-preserved example of the Romanesque Revival, brownstone churches of the mid-19th century.

2. Condition of fabric: The building is in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building is approximately 75 feet by 125 feet, five bays long; rectangular plan; one story plus basement and gallery.
2. Foundations: The foundations are masonry.
3. Wall construction: The masonry walls of brown Connecticut sandstone are laid in a random ashlar pattern with regular quoins at the corners.
4. Structural system: The main auditorium is divided into a nave with single aisles to either side. The round-arched arcade of the nave, supported by octagonal wood columns with Romanesque capitals, carries deep wood trusses in the clerestory zone. The arcade and the outer masonry walls carry the large wood trusses of the roof.
5. Chimneys: The heating plant has a brick chimney.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: The main entrance with two-leaf wooden doors set in triple, round-arched openings with Romanesque moldings and column shafting is located in the gabled end of the west front. The secondary side entrance, a single-arched opening, is located in the northwest corner tower. The rear entrance is through the later parish house.
 - b. Windows: On the exterior, a belt course divides the walls into two sections, a lower zone and a taller upper zone which corresponds to the gallery level on the interior. Paired round-arched windows in the lower zone correspond to large single-arched windows with heavy label moldings in the upper zone. A triple window composition with a large center window is located over the triple doorways on the facade. There are similar windows and belfry openings in the towers.
7. Roof: The gable roof has bracketed eaves. At the southwest and northwest, two square corner towers of unequal height flank the main facade. The south tower is capped with a low roof just above the eave line of the main roof. The north tower, now capped with a low roof just above the ridge line of the main roof, originally carried a steep pyramidal roof and open cupola.

8. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: A broad entrance stoop leads to the main entrance on the west.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The main entrance leads to a shallow narthex which contains doors to the corner towers. The two-story nave has open galleries above the side aisles. On the east wall is a very shallow chancel framed by a large arch. On the west wall the choir and organ gallery is framed by a similar arch. The nave contains 154 pews which seat over one thousand people. The cellar under the narthex and west portion of the nave is used as a furnace room. The later two-story parish house which adjoins the church building at the east contains classrooms and offices.
2. Stairways: The circular stairs in the corner towers lead from the narthex to the galleries.
3. Flooring: There are wood floors throughout.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Wood wainscoting is topped by plaster walls which have a very lightly scored rusticated pattern. The flat plaster ceilings have deeply projecting beams and large curved knee braces. The high-gallery ceilings reduce the height of the clerestories to a relatively short zone. Rosette windows in the clerestory zone open to the attic space above the galleries. Electric lights behind the rosette windows are no longer connected. The wood-gallery fronts have round-arched arcaded panels. The decoration in 1880 by John LaFarge included new colored windows, painting of the altar wall, and painting of the ceilings. Rich, deeply colored tapestried patterns run throughout the LaFarge work. Some of the stained glass windows are signed and dated. Blues, greens, reds, and gold predominate. The east wall is done in oil paint applied directly to the slightly textured plaster wall.
5. Doorways and doors: The round-arched doors are framed by architraves of large Gothic torus undercut molding. The grained woodwork is a medium tan in color.
6. Special decorative features: The long, low wood pews have doors which open into the side aisles. The altar is mahogany.
7. Hardware: None of note.
8. Lighting: Some of the original gas fixtures have been

electrified and are still in place, particularly in the narthex. A bill for the fixtures dated March 25, 1854, is on display in the narthex.

9. Heating: There is a modern heating system.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church is located on a southeast corner in a residential area with some shops in residentially scaled buildings. The building, set on a rising lot, is placed slightly back from the sidewalk.
2. Historic landscape design: None
3. Outbuildings: None
4. Walks: A short walk and a series of steps lead from the sidewalk to the main entrance.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

Newport HABS Project -- 1970. Sponsored in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman. Under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Osmund Overby, (University of Missouri), Project Supervisor, Cervin Robinson, photographer.